DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 176 319 CS 205 177

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TITLE Learning the Uses of Chaos.
PUB DATE May 79
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English (12th, Ottawa, Canada, May 8-11, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Critical Thinking; *Discovery Learning; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Process

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issue of learning to write and the need for defining a means of teaching the process of composing. Following a description of what kind of process writing is not, the composing process is presented as a continuum of making meaning out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, and syntactic fragments. The discovery teaching methods of K. Koch, S. Ashton-Warner, and P. Freire are cited and a theory of interpretive paraphrase--the means by which meanings are hypothesized, identified, developed, modified, discarded or stabilized--is suggested as a method of teaching students how to think critically and how to edit their own writing. (AEA)

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Learning the Uses of Chaos

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May, 1979

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Learning the Uses of Chaos

It is, perhaps, a measure of our sophistication that we English teachers can boldly set about discussing the topic learning to write, identifying an issue in non-pretentious terms while realizing that it isn't as simple a matter as it sounds. Holding a conference on the topic suggests an awareness that learning to write is a matter for theoretical consideration, not just recipe swapping; that the difficulties we must confront in teaching students how to write deserve something other than high-minded expressions of dismay. We need theory in order to find out what can be done about teaching composition and to define what it is we think we are doing. No theoretical premise is of greater importance to all the new rhetorics, from "free writing" to tagmemics, than that composing is a process; however, this idea, which is already conventional wisdom, is not helping us as it should. The idea that there is not just composition but composing is becoming dogma, an idea being handed on to teachers and students alike, before the implications it might have for pedagogy and course design have been explored or understood.

What does it mean to say that composing is a process? Why is it important that, at all levels of development and in all grades, students of writing should understand that composing is a process? How do we design courses--sequences of assignments--which can make that understanding something other than received dogma? For unless composing as a process is what we actually

teach, not just what we proclaim, the idea cannot be fruitful. In many instances, the language of the new rhetoric is used when there is no correspondingly new attitude towards what we are teaching, to say nothing of how we are teaching it. There may be talk of "pre-writing," but the term is misleading if it is taken to mean getting a thesis statement. (I have seen a writing lab manual for tutors which defines pre-writing as a matter of learning to outline.) A textbook which exhorts students in the first chapter to carry through discovery procedures and in the second discusses the rhetorical modes as they were defined in the eighteenth century has not encouraged students to understand the relationship of earlier and later phases of composing.

It is not instructive to talk about "the composing process" unless we have a conception of the kind of process writing is--or, at least, the kind of process it is not. Thus, writing is not like cooking a particular dish; writing may resemble, at one stage or another, some phase of, say, making a cream sauce, but it is not sequential or "linear"; it is not measurement, followed by amalgamation and transformation. An analogy for writing which is based on culinary experience would have to include ways of calculating the guests' preferences, as well as of determining what's on the shelf--the cook's and the grocer's--and what's in the purse. Nor is the composing process like playing games or developing various motor skills. Such analogies leave out of account language, or they conceive of it in mechanistic or merely behavioral terms. But language is not a tool merely; it is not a set of counters to be moved about

nor a set of conventions to be manipulated in order to express one or another idea. We don't have ideas which we put into words; we don't think of what we want to say and then write. In composing, we make meanings. We find the forms of thought by means of language and we find the forms of language by taking thought. If we English teachers are to understand composing as the kind of process it is, we will need a philosophy of language which can account for this dialectic of forming. A hopeful sign that this is beginning to happen is that English teachers are beginning to study Vygotsky, a developmental psychologist who knew that language and thought do not bear one another a sequential relationship but that they are simultaneous and correlative.

I believe we can best teach the composing process by conceiving of it as a continuum of making meaning, by seeing writing as analogous to all those processes by which we make sense of the world. It is generally a surprise to students to learn that writing has anything in common with anything else they have ever done--and for the very good reason that, as it has generally been taught them, it has indeed nothing much to do with anything they have ever done. But writing, taught as a process of making meanings, can be seen to be like taking in a happening, forming an opinion, deciding what's to be done, construing a text, or reading the significance of a landscape. Thinking, perceiving, writing are all acts of composing: any composition course should insure that students learn the truth of this principle, that making meanings is the work of the active mind and is thus within their natural capacity.

Meanings don't just happen: we make them; we find and form them. In that sense, all writing courses are creative writing courses. Learning to write is learning to do deliberately and methodically with words on the page what we do all the time with language. Meanings don't come out of the air; we make them out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, from the mysterious and unformed. The most useful slogan for the composition course--along with "How do I know what I mean 'til I hear what I say?"--is Ex nihilo nihil fit: Out of nothing, nothing can be made. When we teach pre-writing as a phase of the composing process, what we are teaching is not how to get a thesis statement but the generation and uses of chaos; when we teach revision as a phase of the composing process, we are teaching just that--re-seeing the ways out of chaos.

Our students, because they are language animals, because they have the power of naming, can generate chaos; they can find ways out of chaos because language creates them.

Language itself is the great heuristic. Any name implies generalization; any cluster of names implies classification; any classification implies statement. As Kenneth Burke says, to name something "A" is to declare simultaneously that it is not"Not-A." All rhetorical functions can be derived from that most profound of linguistic facts, that words, in Vygotsky's formulation, come into being as verbal generalizations. It is, as Cassirer so beautifully

explains, the discursive character of language, its tendency to "run along," to be syntactical, which brings thought along with it. It is the discursive, generalizing, forming power of language which makes meanings from chaos.

Students can learn to write by learning the uses of chaos, which is to say, re-discovering the power of language to generate the sources of meaning. Our job is to design sequences of assignments which let our students discover what language can do, what they can do with language. Kenneth Koch got poetry out of his youngsters because he gave them syntactic structures to play with; Sylvia Ashton-Warner's "key vocabulary" became what she called "the captions of the dynamic life itself"; Paulo Freire's "generative words" provided the means by which the peasants in his literacy classes--"culture circles"-- could name the world. Our students can learn to write only if we give them back their language, and that means playing with it, working with it, using it instrumentally, making many starts. We want them to learn the truth of Gaston Bachelard's observation that "in the realm of mind, to begin is to know you have the right to begin again." Our students cannot learn the uses of chaos if we continue to make assignments appropriate not to these beginnings but to the final phases of the composing process. Beginnings, for instance, should never be graded: identifying mistakes is irrelevant when we are teaching making a start at the process of making meanings.

Now, chaos is scarey: the meanings which can emerge from it, which can be discerned taking shape within it, can be

discovered only if students who are learning to write can learn to tolerate ambiguity. It is to our teacherly advantage that the mind doesn't like chaos; on the other hand, we have to be alert to the fact that meanings can be arrived at too quickly, the possibility of other meanings being too abruptly foreclosed. What we must realize ourselves and make dramatically evident to our students is what I. A. Richards means when he calls ambiguities "the hinges of thought."

Learning to write means learning that the making of meaning is contingent on perspective and context. Meanings change as we think about them; statements and events, significances and interpretations can mean different things to different people at different times. Meanings are not pre-baked or set for all time; they are created, found, formed, and reformed. Even dictionary definitions change: that is a brand new discovery for most students, that language has a history. How we see something--a relationship between word and idea or object, or between two words or statements--depends on our experience, and on our purposes, our perspective, "where we're coming from." We know reality not directly but by means of the meanings we make. (The role of critical thinking is, of course, to review and revise those meanings.) What we know, we know in some form--perceptual or conceptual. We see relationships not in isolation but in a field of other relationships: as a text has a context, so events and ideas and objects have a "context of situation," in Malinowski's formulation. It is the nature of signifiers to be unclear, multivalent, polysemous,

ambiguous, until perspective and context are determined. I consider it the most important advance of the semester if a student moves from "Webster tell us..." to "What this situation means depends on how you look at it." It depends is a slogan I would add to Ex nihilo nihil fit.

For students to discover that ambiguities are "the hinges of thought," we surely will have to move from the inert, passive questions which we inscribe in the margins of papers and which we direct to student readers: "What do you mean here?" and "What is the author trying to say?" Those are not critically useful questions; they elicit insubstantial responses or "I-thought-that-was-what-you-wanted" or, on occasion, students simply cast their eyes heavenwards. We should focus on the shifting character of meaning and the role of perspective and context, and we can do so by raising such questions as these: "How does it change your meaning if you put it this way?" "If the author is saying X, how does that go with the Y we heard him saying in the preceding chapter--or stanza?" "What do you make of passage A in the light of passage B?" Students learn to use ambiguities as "the hinges of thought" as they learn to formulate alternate readings; to say it again, watching how the "it" changes. In my view, from my perspective, interpretive paraphrase is another name for the composing process itself. It is the means by which meanings are hypothesized, identified, developed, modified, and stabilized. And, furthermore, it is the only way I know to teach students how to edit their compositions. Interpretive paraphrase enacts the dialogue which is

at the heart of all composing: a writer is in dialogue with his various selves and with his audience. And here is where the classroom hour can actively help us. The composition classroom ought to be a place where the various selves are heard and an audience's response is heard--listened to and responded to. Language is an exchange: we know what we've said, and what can be understood from it, when we get a response; we come to know what we mean when we hear what we say. It is this critical, reflexive character of language which allows us to think about thinking. Learning to write involves us all in many such un-vicious circles whereby we interpret our interpretations.

Interpretive paraphrase--continually asking "How does it change the meaning if I put it this way?"--is of course the principal method of critical inquiry, but its importance for us in the composition classroom is that it teaches students to see relationships and to discover that that is what they do with their minds. It does not seem so to them: isolation and absurdity, not connectedness and meaningfulness, are for them the characterizing qualities of most experience. Perhaps it's time to stop when one reaches the point of huge sociological generalization, but I think that this one is true; it is, after all, only another way of speaking of the alienation which is recognizably the mark of our era. If we can make the composition classroom a forum, a culture circle, a theatre, a version of Tolstoy's armchair aswarm with children questioning, talking, and arguing--if the composition classroom is the

place where dialogue is the mode of making meaning, then we will have a better chance to dramatize not only the fact that language itself changes with the meanings we make from it and that its powers are generative and developmental, but also that it is the indispensable and unsurpassable means of reaching others and forming communities with them. The ability to speak is innate, but language can only be realized in a social context. Dialogue, that is to say, is essential to the making of meaning and thus to learning to write. The chief use of chaos is that it creates the need for that dialogue.